

## Sonnet XXVIII

### *Glossary*

letters	correspondence
mute	without sound
tremulous	trembling, unsteady
sank	to sink down (overcome by emotion)
quailed	trembled, shivered
thine	yours
ill availed	badly used,

### *Summary*

This sonnet tells of the speaker as she goes through her treasured letters from her lover. She shuffles through the letters citing lines and revealing her intense emotional reaction to them. It is obvious she often takes pleasure in the activity. This sonnet initially seems written for the persona's own enjoyment but in



the second last line she directly addresses her lover, and concludes the poem with a comment about the nature of the love she feels.

### *Discussion*

The sonnet tells of the speaker's re-reading of letters she has received that she holds very dear. She seems to know them by heart. We guess straight away that these are the very famous letters that Browning wrote to Barrett Browning during their courtship. These letters trace their developing love and Browning's success in wooing his reluctant bride.

As the letters allow her to flash back to the past she uses past tense ("He wished"). She refers to each letter as "This" as in 'this one said'. The repetition of "this" emphasises how many letters she is sorting through. This also reminds us how well known they are which reflects her fascination in them. This sorting technique also recreates her actions as she grabs one letter after the other. The repeated ellipses create the pausing between letters. This is very dramatic and cleverly recreates the action of the described scene.

The speaker's enthusiasm and delight in her letters is revealed immediately as she exclaims, "My letters!" The "My" is possessive and reflects her regard for the correspondence. Even the dash after this exclamation shows the power they have over her – she seems quite without words. She is very aware of the seeming contradiction as they are inanimate and colourless: "all dead paper, . . . mute and white". Yet this is their literal description and despite it they are powerful and evocative: "they seem alive and quivering". The use of the onomatopoeic "quivering" heightens their life and vitality and she creates an image of

them shaking against her hand, which is also trembling, as she opens the string that ties the letters together.

The use of the string to hold the letters together tells us of her regard for them. They are clearly looked after and protected against loss. The use of the word, "tonight" as she drops them into her lap implies she has unwrapped and gone through the bundle many times. It seems this is a common occurrence that gives her enormous pleasure.

She then goes through a number of letters and quotes content and specific comments that draw her delight. This process also seems to trace their developing relationship. The first letter she refers to tells of Browning's request to see her – "he wished to have me in his sight" the comment "as a friend" shows the relationship at this time was barely into its infancy. Perhaps too it tells us of Browning's cleverness as he tries to make his request less threatening by emphasising the platonic nature of his visit.

She then refers to another letter that fixed the time for a visit, "a day in spring / To come and touch my hand". Here the reference to spring is heavily symbolic. It is a time of vitality and new life. Browning's entry into her life turned it upside down and she felt she was revitalised. Prior to Browning she believed she was declining towards death.

The physical aspects of the relationship are shown to be intoxicating and many point to the sexual tension in this sonnet. Barrett Browning was an innocent, albeit older woman at this stage of her life. The gesture is very tame, although far more meaningful in the Victorian era than today. Her extreme reaction, she "wept for it" hints of a deep need for affection and regard. It has been seen to show a sexual need. She cannot be brazen but her reactions and desires seemed to be underpinned by a sexual

awareness. It definitely reminds us of the dark, loneliness of her life before Browning and the passion of the love that has developed.

Perusing another letter, she contrasts the lightness of the paper the letters are written on to the weighty feelings expressed by the words, "*Dear, I love thee*" and her own substantial, life changing responses to them. She tells how she was so physically overcome by the force of her response to vow of love that she "sank & quailed". These words forcefully depict her own powerlessness under the weight of her feelings. She cannot hold her body up so she "sank". Yet the word "quailed" has connotations of fear and vulnerability. It implies the words of love alarmed the persona. It reminds us how confused Barrett Browning was, especially early on in the relationship, since her world was in turmoil and she knew her father's view of such relationships.

Yet she could never deny the love. The notion that the sentiments were monumental is shown by her reference to God. While she uses the simile, "I sank & quailed As if God's future thundered on my past", to emphasise her enormity of feeling the reference to God is also important. She presents their relationship as "God's future" and this shows she considers her lover, and her future with him, to be part of God's plan for her. The use of the strong onomatopoeic "thundered" depicts the unarguable rightness of the relationship. This simile shows her religious faith and explains how she was able to find the strength to oppose her father in the patriarchal Victorian world.

The next letter she looks at says, "I am thine" and she tells how the "ink has faded" because she has held it so frequently to her "heart that beats too fast". Again her emotional response to her lover's letters stresses as her

human body seems unable to cope with the nature of her reaction. She then goes to consider another letter, "And this" but stops to affectionately address her lover ("O love") directly. These are the two most difficult lines of the sonnet and people have seen them very differently.

*O love, thy words have ill availed,  
If, what this said, I dared repeat at last!-*

Some have argued the persona is saying his words have not convinced her of his love (as in his words have not been used well) and that she is not certain. They go on to claim she dares to hope he is sincere but cannot be sure.

This seems out of place with the preceding sonnets which seem to show she is past such doubt. The last line must be taken into account and, while its syntax is confusing, it seems to be saying something like, *If I dared repeat what this letter says, your words would not have been well-used*. This points to the idea that this letter she has picked up tells of feelings so powerful that she cannot speak them aloud. They are too special, private and spiritually fulfilling. We know she couldn't tell of the letter's content since she stopped to address him. The exclamation mark at the end seems to show her thrill and perhaps even a sense of triumph. The intensity of her returned feelings are thus shown.

*Ideas*

*The power of love*

This sonnet once again explores the power of love. It is the love that the letters contain that transforms the persona's

life. The letters "seem alive and quivering" because of the vibrant sentiments. It is this power that astounds Barrett Browning, so much so she is physically weakened by it. The strength of her own response pushed her to the ground as she "sank and quailed". Her heart "beats too fast". Indeed her reaction to the letters shows feelings that are almost beyond the capacity of her mortal capabilities.

### *The nature of ideal love*

Once more love is depicted as beyond the physical to a spiritual level. The persona treasures the letters, carefully keeping them together with string. It is clear she knows them by heart as she moves through the bundle selecting those to comment on, "This said...", "And this..." Such a love is not only powerful but incredibly positive and uplifting. This idea is shown by her tears at his touch of her hand – "I wept for it". This is supported by her reference to planning to meet him in the spring. It is an image full of vitality and new life. Hence love is shown to be life-giving and transforming.

This sublime representation of love is reinforced by the fact that her reaction is almost too much for her human body to bear shows this, hence she sinks and her heart that beats "too fast". The love that she so delights in is a love that is so special it cannot be put into words by the poet. The last two lines can be seen to state her inability to repeat his sentiments. Rather than being due to uncertainty this may well be as she is too overcome with the depth of her feelings. While he may have used words to express his love perhaps she dares not repeat them.

There is also a sense of the persona's passivity in this sonnet. She sits with the letter on her knees and speaks of

all his words. We know she responded with her own letters but these are not mentioned. He demands a meeting and it is he who cajoles her with the 'just friends' line. In this way it is his actions that seem to propel the relationship. He can write things but she cannot repeat them. His role in the relationship is presented as dominant. Again she reflects the era she is writing in.

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## Sonnet XIII - Questions

1. Summarise this poem in FIVE points.
2. a. Discuss how the image of the letters as alive helps represent Barrett Browning's ideas.  
  
b. Discuss how the image of God's future thundering helps represent Barrett Browning's ideas.
3. a. Examine the structure of the sonnet. Summarise its features (ie. rhyme scheme, line stresses, line syllables, idea development)  
  
b. How tightly is it organised?
4. Explain how Barrett Browning has used punctuation, especially ellipses, to help represent her ideas.
5. What is the effect of contrasting the weight of the letters to the heaviness of their importance?
6. Compose a sonnet (or a poem if you feel this is too difficult) as Browning where he speaks of his reactions to her letters. Think how he will present her. Will he present himself as dominant?